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ABSTRACT

To advocate the work of Gregory Bateson, especially his Double-Bind theory, this paper describes how the theory can be applied to particular instances and to the general experience of black students in a predominantly white, authoritarian college setting. The paper argues that miscues on the part of black students in the classroom and in writing are a result of confused, near-pathological behavior in a hostile environment. It explains these behaviors as the result of the double-bind, in which black students become enmeshed while trying to respond to a teacher's mixed messages regarding the mechanical structures of edited American English and appropriate rhetorical strategies. For black students, the paper recommends three to six hours of weekly one-to-one instruction in writing, the use of Tyteca's "The New Rhetoric" to delineate rhetorical models, and instruction in using process models to write papers. It also recommends using strategies for translating original manuscripts into edited American English, including computerized text editing systems. (CRH)

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Developing Writing Competency in Black Students: The Double-Bind
Theory and the University Context

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Developing Writing Competency in Black Students: The Double-bind Theory
and the University Context

Chezia Brenda Thompson

At first glance, it would seem that studying Black Literature with a Black professor would be the least problematic situation Black students could encounter in the university. Yet, if you take the situation, which includes the task of writing critical papers in Edited American English, you can get an incredibly knotted series of contradictions that seem to defy analysis and resolution. I first encountered the situation as a teaching assistant in the Black Studies Program at Washington University. I was faced with the same situation as the instructor for English Composition Black Emphasis courses in a very innovative and much-debated curriculum at Forest Park Community College. The situation didn't change as I faced students in Black Literature classes at Clarion State College, who were appalled at the thought of having to do papers; and also at the University of Maryland at Baltimore County, where the pattern of psychosis about writing is fairly apparent. It was only when I encountered Gregory Bateson's formulation of the Double-bind Theory and began reading the novels of Zora Neale Hurston that I could begin to analyze and deal with the problem of developing writing competency in Black students in a predominantly white university setting.

As a junior in undergraduate school, I stumbled upon Zora Neale Hurston in an anthropology course that I was auditing. The instructor introduced her work as an example of BAD ANTHROPOLOGY. She is, of course, a very famous and much loved Black writer and folklorist out of Florida, who studied the peoples of the South and the Caribbean. However, I didn't know any of that then. Reading her work, often written in several forms of Black English dialects, I realized that she had created separate orthographies for a voice that I had never seen on

paper. It was sometimes my mother's voice, from the Mississippi Delta or the voice of my dance teacher from Jamaica or Haiti: and sometimes, in blends with the narrator's "proper" voice, it represented the different voices of the students in the classes in which I served as a teaching assistant. At this point I knew, though I had guessed earlier, that they were attempting to do something natural--not something perverse: BUT WHY WAS MY WRITING SO DIFFERENT FROM THEIR WRITING? I knew for sure that it didn't have anything to do with being SMARTER. We were all generally equally matched and worked hard to do well in all of our studies to maintain extensive scholarship funding. My cousin, who was majoring in anthropology and encountering the worst kind of institutionalized racist dogma you can imagine, FORCED ME TO READ GREGORY BATESON'S STEPS TO AN ECOLOGY OF MIND. She was trying to involve me in a discussion of her apparent schizophrenia. She was an Africa-American but was expected to believe, without contesting, the pseudo-scientific racist dogma documenting the so-called "inferiority of the Black man" and write in that racist mode of thought about herself and her people. AND SHE WANTED TO DO IT! She needed to do it to get good grades: but she couldn't and the total impact on her psychological health was devastating. She insisted that I was schizophrenic also but that somehow I had managed to get mine under control. She hypothesized that my severe family circumstances had forced me to learn to be functionally schizophrenic to survive as a balanced, normal-acting person in America. She insisted that I had learned to use language as a trigger to switch personalities and communication modes, like an actor doing different characters. Therefore, my writing could be just as diverse because I was applying the same technique to it as a form of communication.

Gil Scott Heron, a popular poet and cultural commentator, defines schizophrenic as a state of being besides yourself and both of you are crazy. Imagine being in a situation where no matter what you do you will not win. You will lose

something, no matter what you do; so you attempt to satisfy at least two conflicting demands and find yourself in the Double-bind. You can read about Bateson's specific application of the Double-bind Theory to communication problems in his book; however, if we apply Bateson's delineation of the ingredients for the DOUBLE-BIND to my classmates' and students' situation, we get the following hypothesis [quotations are from the original paper by Bateson and his colleagues]:

- I. "There are two or more person's or groups, and of these [for our purposes as well as Bateson's] one is designated as the victim. BLACK STUDENTS OFTEN SEE THE PREDOMINANTLY WHITE UNIVERSITY SETTING AS A THEM AND US SITUATION. THE US IS VICTIMIZED BY THE THEM, WHO HAVE CONSIDERABLE POWER TO DO ANYTHING THEY PLEASE.
- II. "The experience of frustration is repeated. The Double-bind is a recurrent theme in the experience of the victims. This hypothesis does not invoke a single traumatic experience, but such repeated experiences that the Double-bind structure comes to be an habitual expectation." The students had repeatedly experienced being given directives that they felt conflicted with developing their potential and best interests in English classes and literature classes.
- III. "There is a primary negative injunction that says (a) Do not do so-and-so or I will punish you; or (b) If you do not do so-and-so I will punish you. This context of learning is based on the avoidance of punishment rather than a context of reward seeking." There is no formal reason for the selection of this methodology, except that teachers appear to prefer it. The students had been repeatedly punished by negative grades and the denial of sufficient funds or enriching educational experiences. The movement toward state-regulated competency tests now threatens to add denial of graduation to the list of punishments.
- IV. "There is a secondary injunction conflicting with the first at a more abstract level, and like the first enforced by punishments or signals which threaten survival or appear to threaten survival." The students admitted that they really wanted to learn to write what they called "proper English" and tried to do so BUT THEIR OWN VOICES, THEIR OWN WAY OF SAYING THINGS, SEEMED TO ALWAYS GET IN THE WAY.
- V. "There is a negative injunction prohibiting the victim from escaping from the field." The students realized that there was no escape. Once out of school, they knew that they would have to compete in a job market that required them to have competency--or so they thought.

- VI. "Finally, the complete set of ingredients is no longer necessary when the victim has learned to perceive his universe in Double-bind patterns. Almost any part of a Double-bind sequence may then be sufficient to precipitate panic, rage, or despair." The students were seeking temporary assylum in Black Studies courses but were being faced with the same performance demands and still not getting any assistance in resolving the Double-bind in relationship to writing tasks.

Bateson goes on to describe the pathology of DOUBLE-BIND behavior and much of it was applicable to the students that I was servicing. His analysis and resolution focused on examining "normal" communication problems in social interaction and BINGO! I realized that my cousin was right. That I had just minimally recovered from several diseases of the nervous system that centered on the tension created by the necessity for me to juggle realities at any given moment: that I could talk like or write like any of several different people at any given moment and there was no continuity between languages, intonation, facial expression, body movement etc. It made sense then, that if I had traded being mentally ill for the ability to do well in a semi-hostile environment, that just maybe my classmates' miscues in class and in their writing were partially due to a kind of confused, maybe pathological, behavior in the same semi-hostile environment. (There was a different kind of BLACK STUDENT in predominantly white universities in the 1970's than there is now. The universities corrected their errors in admissions policy and changed the nature of the population. However, the current population appears to share the problem of displaying competency in Edited American English.)

What I had to do to heal myself was create a safe space within the university context, so that I could demystify the language, Edited American English (how is it different from other kinds of English); and demystify the university environment (who is them and who is us). I was lucky and there were people who under-

stood my explanation and created that safe space for me, which allowed me to help create it for other students.

I want to spend my remaining moments describing in detail the vision of one methodology applicable in developing competency in writing in Edited American English in African-American students, to which understanding the Double-bind Theory led me.

Many, though not all, students in the university setting face the problem of discovering how to display competency in the standardized medium of communication. In the case of displaying competency in writing, in formal classroom situations, all students face the DOUBLE PROBLEM of: (1) Utilizing the "proper" mechanical structures of a specific English dialect, known as Edited American English and (2) Utilizing the appropriate rhetorical strategies to have maximum impact on the audience reading the paper. Much academic writing is done in an argumentative mode; so that all students entering an accredited 4-year college or university must meet the challenge of executing argumentative writing at some point during their matriculation period.

African-American students with writing problems in the university setting face still another task of a different nature. Not only must they develop and refine a system of writing in a "prestige dialect" but they must also develop and refine a system of logic and a world view that will bridge the gap between the ontological structure which they have constructed living as a segregated minority in America, and the "proper" world view possessed by the middle-class American, which must be exhibited in the logical progression of the writing for it to display competency. So the African-American student in the university context, who wants to excel, must learn to write in a prestige dialect; as well as learn to recognize and argue, in formal writing assignments, utilizing traditional rhetorical strategies that will have an impact on an audience reflecting Euro-

American, middle-class values and modes of thought.

While the teacher, regardless of racial origin, is working simply to create a better writer, the students being affected by the teacher's behavioral modification strategy, intuitively understands that they they will pick up more than a way to write in the formal classroom. They realize that they will acquire habits, values, cultural dictates which are more subtle and have more impact on their personalities than the teacher indicates. Students understand that the teacher is trying to get them to build a specific educational experience into their mechanism for determining how language works both in and out of the classroom. The teacher is trying to get students to orient themselves to a specific type of social context which requires that they develop insight into the procedures for "correctly" solving problems related to language usage in formal settings.

On the other hand, students may be less concerned with assimilating into the "proper mode" than learning "proper grammar," which they see as a task that assaults their mentality less; but nevertheless is important in learning Edited American English. Though English courses traditionally have been used to "weed out" students entering the university and funnel workers in at varying socioeconomic levels in the work force, it is currently a popular trend to encourage students to develop their "creative intellect"--to "write from their own experiences"--argue "in their own voices" for what they believe is correct or true. When African-American students, with writing problems, try to execute the first series of commands related to exhibiting competency in Edited American English, while trying to meet this second series of demands (that is, to write from their own experiences in their own voices), they often find themselves trapped in the Double-Bind. Fundamentally, it means that students are unable to clarify the instructions being given to help them correct their discrimination of what items, in the teacher's dual message, they are to respond to. The result of

of the students' attempt to resolve all of the conflict involved may take the following forms of writing: (1) Sincere but mechanically "bad" writing; (2) Awkward and clumsy writing that attempts to replicate the proper tone and vocabulary of Edited American English; (3) Insensitive writing that doesn't reflect any attempt to help the audience--the teacher--understand the writer's point of view; (4) Minimally competent writing that contains gaps in the logical development of the argument the writer is delineating; (5) Consistent and complete writer's block that inhibits all writing activity, including the ability to develop original topics as part of an environmental problem-solving activity; (6) Confused and disoriented writing that unsuccessfully attempts to combine the two dialects and the two world views. Negatively re-inforcing these students does not help them write better. In most cases they need three to six hours weekly of one-on-one instruction to improve drastically in one semester; but I think that any additional instruction should take the following form.

As teachers, one of the questions that we should pose is How can the students' native language ability and native intelligence be used to teach them what they need to know to display competency in argumentative writing in Edited American English? Several strategies can be employed concurrently. The first and primary step is to list and explain the rhetorical models of types of argument reflected in the students' writing, by using a traditional delineation of types as they are represented in Olbrecht Tyteca's categorization in The New Rhetoric. The teacher must help the student understand the difference between developing papers using arguments based on a specific structure of reality and papers based on quasi-logical arguments. For the student, this information will create the option of choosing the "appropriate modes" of communicating meaning within the formal university context. The student need not become mentally schizophrenic while consciously maintaining alternative communication strategies.

Secondly, teachers need to review and explain at least one heuristic for composing texts that utilizes the recursive writing procedure delineated by Linda Flower and John Hayes in A Process Model of Composition. Students often must write papers on topics that they are not interested in and on topics that they must organize out of their own creative intelligence. A process model of how to write a paper on anything gives the student a "formula" to experiment with and to tailor to fit his or her own personal needs and style. It also helps the teacher to objectify the procedure. Demystifying what the student has to do to develop proficiency reduces the tension between the student and the teacher that contributes to a dysfunctional mentoring relationship.

Thirdly, but just as important as the preceding two points, is the necessity of devising and explaining a strategy for translating the students' original manuscripts, in any English dialect, into Edited American English--preferably through the use of an instructional program on a computerized text-editing system. The teacher must differentiate between the rules for executing traditional literacy and humanities-related research tasks and technical writing tasks, and tell the students which set of rules the class will be using. These kinds of instructional strategies require a different kind of writing assignment and a more comprehensible method of holistically grading papers. The model of the formal proposal statement encourages students to organize their paper in a coherent fashion before they start writing the first draft [see appendix]. It also provides a way for the teacher to know what rhetorical objectives the writers have assigned their papers, and to use that information in the grading process [see appendix for sample holistic grading chart].

We live in a society dominated by nationalistic value attitudes and assumptions. We MUST kill the Russians to stop communism; watch the sneaky Japanese, who are planning to blow us up; make all of the Mexicans in America speak English exclusively;

create bombs that kill all the people and contaminate the Earth, but leave the buildings in good shape; and last, but not least of all, EVERYONE must speak and write "Proper English" or be punished in some way. English classes and Literature classes, which include African, African-American, and African-Caribbean humanities courses, are among the chief exponents of the abstract, logical reasoning patterns necessary for successfully functioning in the university environment, as well as in a technological society. If African-American students, like all students, are to achieve higher levels of academic performance, the teaching/learning environment must focus on helping students to develop basic information-processing skills, formal operative thought patterns, and positive attitudes, positive images of themselves, that will be essential in their becoming better writers in any mode and in the world outside of the university walls.